Review
Reviewed Work(s): A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years by William C. Harvard and Walter Sullivan
Review by: Daniel Joseph Singal
Source: *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Nov., 1982), pp. 597-598

A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years. Edited, with an introduction, by William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan. (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, c. 1982. Pp. xii, 190. $12.95.)

Over fifty years have passed since an impassioned band of twelve southern writers known as the Nashville Agrarians issued their famous polemical symposium, *I'll Take My Stand.* Not only has their attack on modern industrial society remained in print; it is probably more widely read and discussed today than ever before. In light of this fact two current members of the Vanderbilt faculty, William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan, organized a conference at Vanderbilt to commemorate the book's fiftieth birthday. The present volume includes revised versions of six papers given at that conference along with a partial transcript of a lively panel discussion among the three surviving members of the original group, Lyle Lanier, Andrew Nelson Lytle, and Robert Penn Warren.

Like most papers written for such occasions, the essays in this book are better at providing broad perspectives than at reaching new critical insights. To the extent that they share a common theme, it is that the Agrarians were prophets who anticipated the ills of late-twentieth-century American life—especially the disintegration of family and community life in the face of modern mass society and man's lack of a harmonious ecological relationship with nature. Far from being a reactionary tract, *I'll Take My Stand* is now celebrated as a forward-looking work.

Beyond this contention the individual essays in *A Band of Prophets* contain few surprises. Charles P. Roland deftly sketches the historical background out of which the Agrarians came. Louis D. Rubin, Jr.,

repeats his convincing argument that *I'll Take My Stand* must be interpreted primarily in terms of literary symbolism, while Lewis P. Simpson also covers familiar territory in claiming that the real intent of the twelve authors was to establish a southern "Republic of Letters." A piece by Robert B. Heilman attempts to tie the Agrarians to various movements in European cultural history, while George Core in his paper connects them with the rise of the New Criticism.

The one contribution that does conspicuously break new ground is by John Shelton Reed, a sociologist at Chapel Hill. Reed sees the Agrarians as protonationalists and insists that they were railing not just at industrialism but perhaps even more at the colonial relationship that had long existed between North and South. Like nationalists elsewhere, he claims, their chief grievance was directed against the "foreign" culture imposed on their people; their concern with political and economic issues developed when they realized that they would have to deal with such matters to gain the cultural autonomy they sought for the region. Reed draws many other parallels between Agrarianism and other nationalist movements, including the tendency to focus on a mythical Golden Age in the past, a desire to regain a proper connection with nature, and a conflict with an older generation that is perceived as having been seduced or "bought off" by the dominant "foreign" power.

Reed's thesis strikes this reviewer as one of the most promising new approaches we have for understanding the movement. However, one still wonders why, if they were such fervent nationalists, the overwhelming majority of Agrarians gave up their campaign just a few years after their symposium appeared? A related question: why was this particular group of young men so susceptible to the currents of southern nationalism at a time when most writers within the region took a far more ambivalent stance? In this fashion Reed's essay suggests the kinds of specific problems that ought to be explored as we head toward that likely seventy-fifth anniversary conference on *I'll Take My Stand.*

Hobart and William Smith Colleges DANIEL JOSEPH SINGAL